

Rep. Susan Wild (PA-7)

Member's Day Testimony

Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

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Request Robust Funding for the Social Security Administration's Operating Account

Social Security is the federal government's single largest program¹ and it is vital to enabling millions of Americans to make ends meet. Workers pay into this program their entire working lives through a dedicated payroll tax, and the program provides income support to retired or disabled workers, their family members and family members of deceased workers.²

Although benefit payments for this critical safety net program are considered mandatory spending, the agency depends on Congressional appropriations to fund its operating budget and carry out its programs. The main operating vehicle is the Limitation on Administrative Expenses account (LAE).³ This account allows the 62,000 agency employees to provide core services in 1,200 field offices, via telephone and over the internet.⁴

This year, the agency expects to complete 2.4 million Social Security income and initial disability claims. They are projected to complete 761,000 disability hearings, 703,000 full medical continuing disability reviews (CDRs) and 2.8 million redeterminations.⁵

Despite the agency's attempts to hit its targets on claims and hearings, and Congress insisting on funds within the LAE to be set aside to clear claims and hearing backlogs, there continues to be a significant, and in some cases life-threatening delay in service. 801,428 people were waiting for a hearing to determine whether they would be awarded their benefits at the end of 2018.⁶ The national average wait time for a Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits hearing is

¹ See CRS In Focus IF10522, *Social Security's Funding Shortfall*.

² Ibid.

³ See CRS Report R44645, *Social Security Administration: FY2017 Appropriations and Recent Trends*.

⁴ Social Security Administration FY19 budget, <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/FY19Files/2019LAE.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *More Than 800,000 Waiting for Social Security Disability Hearings, Wait Times Are Declining But Still Average 18 Months*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2019/02/12/1720954/0/en/More-Than-800-000-Waiting-for-Social-Security-Disability-Hearings-Wait-Times-Are-Declining-But-Still-Average-18-Months.html>.

535 days⁷, and it is over 700 days in many cities⁸. Last year, Philadelphia, a city in my home state, had the longest average wait in the country- 26 months.⁹ One West Philadelphia woman with multiple sclerosis, waited 878 days before getting a favorable ruling.¹⁰

Each year, thousands of people die on the Social Security Disability waiting list. It is reported that 8,699 Americans died on the disability insurance waiting list in FY16. That number rose to 10,002 in 2017.¹¹ Americans also receive poor service when contacting field offices. In Albany, NY, wait times inside the field office averaged 40 minutes, and in the same office, phone answer rates were 72% in 2018.¹² Considering these troubling results, it is alarming that the Administration continues to submit to Congress budgets that are hundreds of million dollars less than what Congress enacted the previous year.¹³

The President's requested budget would not bring us any closer to clearing the agency's backlog, reducing wait times, modernizing the agency's systems, or allowing the Social Security Administration to hire more workers to efficiently carry out its mandate. Without Congressional intervention, more lives will be jeopardized as they wait for assistance. With 63 million people depending on this critical safety net program, I implore this subcommittee to help Americans get the services they need and have earned through the Social Security Administration, by providing robust funding for the agency's operating account-the Limitation on Administrative Expenses account.

⁷ Social Security Administration FY19 budget, <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/FY19Files/2019LAE.pdf>.

⁸ *More Than 800,000 Waiting for Social Security Disability Hearings, Wait Times Are Declining But Still Average 18 Months*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2019/02/12/1720954/0/en/More-Than-800-000-Waiting-for-Social-Security-Disability-Hearings-Wait-Times-Are-Declining-But-Still-Average-18-Months.html>.

⁹ *The wait for Social Security disability benefits in Pa. might grow longer under new proposal*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.philly.com/philly/news/politics/ssi-disability-hearings-congress-backlog-philadelphia-reconsideration-delays-20180725.html>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Turned down for federal disability payments, thousands die waiting for appeals to be heard*, Dec. 27, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2018/12/27/thousands-die-waiting-social-security-disability-insurance-appeals/2420836002/>.

¹² *Schumer scolds Trump budget cuts*, March 20, 2019, https://www.troyrecord.com/news/local-news/schumer-scolds-trump-budget-cuts/article_bb1fdc5e-4785-11e9-887c-fbfe36dff2d6.html.

¹³ Social Security Administration, FY20 The Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees, <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/FY20Files/FY20-JEAC.pdf>